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AGAINST
RELIGIOUS DELUSION.

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A CAUTION against
RELIGIOUS DELUSION.

A
SERMON
ON THE
NEW BIRTH:

Occasioned by the
PRETENSIONS
OF THE
METHODISTS.

By HENRY STEBBING D. D.
Chaplain in Ordinary to His MAJESTY, and
PREACHER to the Honourable Society of
GRAYS-INN.

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GALAT. vi. 15.

*In Christ Jesus neither Circumcision
availeth any thing, nor Uncircum-
cision, but a new Creature.*



IT is evident, and on all Hands
confessed, that the End of
CHRIST'S coming into the
World was to open the way to
eternal Life by Faith and true
Repentance. The World had long lain un-
der great Darkness and Corruption; the
Heathens more especially, whom St. Paul
represents as *walking in the Vanity of their
Mind; as alienated from the Life of God
through the Ignorance that was in them;
as being past feeling, and having given
themselves over unto Lasciviousness to work
all Uncleanness with Greediness*, EPH. iv. 18.
So that their coming to Christ, and sub-
mitting to be governed by the pure Law of
his Gospel, must infer a great and a mighty
Change, as is intimated in the next Chapter
ÿ 8. *Ye WERE sometimes Darkness, but NOW
are ye light in the Lord.* And 1 COR. vi. 9.
— *Neither Fornicators, nor Idolaters, nor*

Adulterers — nor Thieves, nor Covetous, nor Drunkards, nor Revilers, nor Extortioners, shall inherit the Kingdom of God. And SUCH WERE some of you; but ye are WASHED, but ye are SANCTIFIED, but ye are justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

This Change, from Light to Darkness; from Uncleaness to Holiness; running through the whole moral Man, and shewing itself in every Instance of Behaviour; is in Scripture set forth by a Variety of Expressions. Our Saviour calls it a *NEW BIRTH*. *Except a Man be BORN AGAIN he cannot see the Kingdom of God, JOH. iii. 3.* St. Paul, a *new Spirit*, a *new Man*, or (as the Text has it) a *new Creature*. The very Variety of these Expressions shews them to be figurative; and the Circumstances of the Places where they are used sufficiently open to us their true Meaning. The *New Spirit* and the *New Man*, are opposed to the *Old Man*, the *former EVIL CONVERSATION*: And they who are thus *renewed* are said to be *created in RIGHTEOUSNESS and TRUE HOLINESS; putting away Lying — Anger — Stealing, and all manner of corrupt Communication, EPH. iv. 22,—29.* To be *created in Righteousness* (that is, to be so disposed in Heart and Mind as to follow after Righteousness) is to be a *NEW CREATURE*; as St. Paul himself has very plainly shewn us in other Places,
where

where the same thing is mentioned in other Terms. In the Text he says, that in *Christ Jesus neither Circumcision availeth any thing, nor Uncircumcision, but a NEW CREATURE*. In the Chapter before (y 6.) he says, in *Jesus Christ neither Circumcision availeth any thing, nor Uncircumcision, but FAITH WHICH WORKETH BY LOVE*; and I COR. vii. 19. *Circumcision is nothing, and Uncircumcision is nothing, but the KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD*. *Faith*, then, *which worketh by Love*, is the NEW CREATURE; and *keeping the Commandments of God*, is the NEW CREATURE: He who answers to any one of these Characters, is what is intended by all the rest; for they ALL mean but one and the same thing.

How the State of a true Believer came to be represented to us in such Figures as these, it is not at all difficult to apprehend. For there is that Difference between the Temper and Disposition of a Man addicted to his Sensual Lusts, and that of the same Man when reformed by the Influence of the Gospel; as, in a great measure and in several respects, will answer, in Comparison, to the natural Birth, or to a natural Creation. A Regenerate Man hath a Sense and Apprehension of Spiritual things, which he had not in his unregenerate State: Just as a new born Infant has a Sense and Apprehension of natural things, which it had not whilst it was imprisoned in the Womb.

And

And with respect to the most valuable and desirable End of Life, our future Felicity; the Interest we have in *Christ* by becoming his Disciples, and forming our Minds and our Manners, according to his Divine Precepts; brings us, as it were, from a State of *Non-Existence* to a State of *Being*. For in this respect, without *Christ* we are as *nothing*. We have no Right, no Title, no Claim or Pretension to the Heavenly Reward, but by our relation to *Christ* who hath purchased this Inheritance for us. Furthermore, As we are *born* and *created* by the Hand of God, so are we *regenerated* by the Power of his SPIRIT, as our Saviour intimates to us, J O H. iii. 5. *Except a Man be born of—the SPIRIT he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.* Which Expression shews at once the Necessity, both of the *New Birth* to qualify us for eternal Happiness, and, of the Aids of God's Grace to work in us that *Change*, which is signified by our being *born again*. But this is likewise proved from all those Passages in Scripture (of which there is great Variety) where the Life of a good Christian from the Beginning to the Conclusion of it is referred to the Grace of God *working in us both to will and to do*. For if it is owing to God's Grace, that we love him and keep his Commandments; that we believe in *Christ*, and shew forth the Fruits of our Faith in our Lives and Conversations; and

and if this be the thing that is meant by our being *born again*, and being *New Creatures*, as I have now shewn: It must needs be that he who is born *of God*, is born *of the Spirit* also.

You see now what it is to be *born again*. And by what has been thus briefly said, every Christian may judge whether he is a *new Creature*. Is his Faith a lively Faith working by Love? Doth he *add to his Faith Virtue, and to Virtue Knowledge, and to Knowledge Temperance, and to Temperance Patience, and to Patience Godliness, and to Godliness brotherly Kindness, and to brotherly Kindness Charity?* If he doth; he has the Assurance of God's Word that he is *neither barren nor unfruitful in the Knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*, 2 Pet. i. 5--8. What is that Fruit good for which ripeneth not unto the Harvest? — But the Apostle tells us, a few Verses after, that *if we do these Things, an Entrance shall be ministred unto us into the everlasting Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. Yet our Saviour tells us, that *except a Man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God*. To be *born again* therefore can imply no more than the *doing these Things*.

Some, not content with this plain and easy Notion of the new Birth, fill themselves and others with fantastical Conceits. They suppose the new Birth to be the Work
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of God's Spirit, and so far they are right. But they will have it to be a *sensible* Operation; an Operation which may be *felt* and *distinguished* as the Hand of God upon them; *overpowering*, as it were, the Soul: And unless Men are able to give Account of their having at some time or other *experienced* some such sudden Change within themselves; they will not allow him to be *regenerate*, nor therefore, in a *salvable* State. There is this strong Presumption against this Notion at first View; That it agrees not with the ordinary Methods of God's Providence in other Cases, nor with the State of Man considered as a State of Trial. The Apostle tells us that *we walk by Faith, not by Sight*, 2 COR. v. 7. And of this we have the Experience: For God doth not make himself known to us by *sensible Manifestations* of his Presence. We do not see his Shape, nor hear his Voice; but he leaves us to find him out by the Works of his Providence. This is our proper Trial. As little Cause is there to think that (ordinarily) God makes himself known to us by *sensible Operations* of his Spirit upon our *Minds*. For *any* sensible Interposition of Providence to direct us in the Government of ourselves, whether *externally* or *internally* offered, comes to the same thing. The proper Trial of Faith is when we yield Obedience to God upon the Notices of his Word,

Word or the Dictates of our Reasons under the Conduct and Influence of our natural Powers: Nor will this exclude the Concurrence of the Divine Grace *helping* our Infirmities, whilst the Work of the Spirit is considered only as a *secret, imperceptible* Operation. It is the *Hand* of God as *visibly* or *sensibly* distinguishable from common Causes that turns Faith into Sight. What *appears* not to be the Work of God, is to all Intents and Purposes of Faith the same as if it *was* not so. In such a Case it must be by Faith that we know it to be God's Work, if we know it at all.

There are Cases where it is necessary for God to make himself *sensibly* known to the Minds of Men; as when he means to make new Discoveries of his Will. But these Cases are out of the Question. For such Notices, are not intended for the Benefit of those to whom they are immediately communicated, but for the common Good. Faith must have some Ground to stand upon, and must resolve itself into the extraordinary Manifestations of God's Will made known to particular Persons; in which Cases there is always the proper Evidence to convince others that they deserve their Attention. So it was with the Apostles of *Christ*. They had the Manifestation of the Spirit within themselves, declaring unto them *the whole Counsel of God*, as it concerned the Salvation of

Mankind by his Son; and the Miracles which they wrought to shew that what they spake was from God, were the Evidence of it. But these Men have no Proof to offer for *their* inward Manifestations, unless their own confident Assertions may be admitted as such.

But if it were granted that God's leading Men to Repentance, by *sensible Manifestations* of himself in the *Soul*, is consistent with the ordinary Ways of his Providence; this will only prove that it *may* be so; and the Point will still be how do we know that it *is* so? To this some one will answer, I *feel* it; I have the *Experience* of it; and, so far as I can perceive, there will be no disputing *this* Point with him: For you can no more confute a confident Man who tells you that he feels *the Spirit*, than you could if he should tell you he felt a Pain in his Toe or in his Finger. If you should ask, How he *distinguishes* what he calls the *Motions* of the *Spirit*, from the *natural* Operations of the *Soul*; you are never the nearer. He will answer you that he knows them *himself*: But that he can no more explain the Difference *to you*, than he is able to give a blind Man a Notion of Colours, or a deaf Man of Sounds. There would be *Reason* in this, if this was all. If I *experience* any thing it is this, that I am free to act, or to forbear; to lift up my Hand, or to let it fall: But I cannot make
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another Man understand this, if he should deny that he hath any such Experience in himself. Such Enquiries therefore will come to nothing. — But the Questions you may very properly ask are these: “What are your Experiences to me? You say that you feel the Spirit; but do you say that I must feel it too, or else I am not regenerate, or else I cannot be saved? How do you prove this? The Scripture says I must be *born of the Spirit*; but does it say the *New Birth* is and must be a *sensible* Operation of the Spirit? If it does, shew me *where* it says so; if you cannot do this, why will you pretend to be wiser than God? Why do you lay that upon me, which the Scripture has not declared necessary to my Salvation? You say that you have the Spirit; what has the Spirit done for you? Are you led to Repentance? so am I by the Grace of God, tho’ I know nothing of such *inward Feelings* as you talk of. Why then is not my Repentance as good as yours? Why am I not regenerate as well as you?” These Questions are not to be answered. For in the first Place it is certain that the Scripture no where says, that the New Birth must be a *sensible* Operation of the Spirit. Our Saviour’s Words look the other way; *The Wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the Sound thereof, but can’st not tell whence it cometh*

and whither it goeth: So is every one that is born of the Spirit, Joh. iii. 8. We hear the Wind, and we feel it too, because its natural Effect is to strike upon our bodily Organs. We know that we are under the Guidance of God's Spirit the same way, that is, by its Effects; by being disposed to do the Will of our heavenly Father: But whence this good Disposition cometh, by the Manner in which it affects and moves us, we cannot tell; nor therefore can we tell by any thing we feel within ourselves that it cometh from God. Accordingly we may observe that the Scripture never refers Men to their inward Feelings, or Experiences to know whether they are born of God, but to the Fruits of the Spirit in their Lives and Conversations. So St. John, *Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the World; and this is the Victory that overcometh the World, even our Faith*, 1 Ep. v. 4. To the same Purpose, Chap. iii. § 9. *Whosoever is born of God doth not commit Sin.* And Chap. iii. § 29. *If we know that he (God) is righteous, every one that doth Righteousness is born of him.* When you find in yourselves therefore such good Fruits as these; a Faith working by Love, and leading to Repentance; should you be told that you are not born of God or of the Spirit; answer boldly upon the Credit of God's Word, that you are. Of your own Virtues you are conscious, and may give the proper Proofs; and

and you know by God's Word that it is by his Grace that you are thus disposed. This is all the *Experience* you want; and if there are any who boast of *other Experiences* than this, you may very well leave such Boasters to be wise by themselves.

Without troubling yourself therefore to know, whether another Man feels the Spirit, or whether he feels it not, you have this Certainty to trust to; that if you *hold the Faith in a pure Conscience*, you have every thing that is necessary for you. Rest *here* the whole Matter. If they can prove from Scripture, that every Believer who keeps God's Commandments is not in a favable State, or that a Man may be a good Christian and yet be damned; you may listen to what they have to say about their *inward Experiences*, and their *spiritual Feelings*, if after this any thing can be said about Religion that is worth the listening to. But if they cannot prove this (which it is impossible they should) and you are secure of your Virtues; you have nothing to do with any thing farther.

And as this is a *sure* way of judging of our spiritual Estate; so it is the only *safe* one. When a Man tells me he feels the Spirit, I may not be able to show him the contrary to his own Satisfaction; But this I know, that Men may fancy that they feel the Spirit, when they feel nothing but the Workings of their own Passions; and whenever
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this is the Case, they will be apt very confidently to presume themselves to be God's Favourites, when yet there are many Disorders in them which want to be corrected and reformed. It is many times not hard for indifferent Judges, to distinguish these Cases; tho' it is the hardest thing in the World for the Persons so unhappily possessed to find out *themselves*; such is the Witchcraft and Infatuation of an *Enthusiastick* Turn of Mind! Our Saviour tells us, that *every Tree is known by its Fruits*; and what are *the Fruits of the Spirit*? Not vain and confident Boastings; not rash uncharitable Censures, damning all that do not feel what they feel; not gathering tumultuous Assemblies, to the Disturbance of the publick Peace, or the Prejudice of Families; not denying Men the Use of God's Creatures, *which he hath appointed to be received with Thanksgiving*; not setting at nought all Rule and Authority, nor intruding into other Men's Labours; not encouraging Abstinence, Prayer, or any other religious Exercises to the Neglect of the Duties of our Station. Nor these, nor any such disorderly Doings, however coloured over with a specious Shew of Piety, are the Fruits of the Spirit; but *Love, Peace, Long-suffering, Gentleness, Goodness, Meekness*, as St. Paul speaks, Gal. v. 22. *God is not the Author of Confusion but of Peace*, and of a *sound Mind* *; and when-

* 1 Cor. xiv. 33.

ever you observe contrary Effects in those who pretend to more than common Gifts, you may be very certain, that, whatever Spirit else they are led by, they are not led by the Spirit of God.

Reasonable Persons will thus judge who see things at a Distance. But as in ordinary Cases, we stand in too near a Point of View to espy our own Defects; it will be much more so when Reason is blinded by the Disorders of an overheated Imagination: And when Men are strongly prepossessed that they feel the Impulse of the Spirit within themselves; that they are *full of God, full of the Holy Ghost*; such Prepossession will have a greater and more certain Influence upon their Conduct than the plainest Rules in the Bible; which will either be wholly overlooked or made to bend and give way to their own private Conceits. History furnishes us with Examples of this kind sad and many!— On the other hand; when Men forsaking the plain Rule of God's Word, refer themselves to their *inward Experiences*, they may easily fail of those Comforts and Assurances as to their spiritual State which in Reason ought to be the Support of their Virtues, and which their Virtues are in themselves naturally disposed to yield. It is an easy Matter for a Man to satisfy himself in such Questions as these; am I sober, am I chaste; am I just and charitable to
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my Neighbour; do I serve God in the Use of his Ordinances? These are Points in which nobody can be mistaken who means well. And if all this will do, it will be an Encouragement to hope well, and to go on to do still better and better. But if however a Man has behaved in these and all other respects (if any more there are) in which the Duty of a Christian is concerned; he is never to think well of himself, till he *experiences* * something within himself, which he has not yet experienced, and which he cannot be assured beforehand that he *ever shall* experience, so long as he lives; this will lead him to cast off all Hope in God, and to give himself up to Despair, which if it drives him not to Distraction and Madness (no uncommon Effect in such

* That this is the Doctrine of the present *Methodists* appears from Mr. WHITEFIELD's *Journal continued*, p. 81. where speaking of the Conversion of Mr. Benjamin Seward (to Methodism) he cries out — "Behold! here was one
 " who constantly attended on the Means of Grace, exact in
 " his Morals, humane and courteous in his Conversation,
 " who gave much in Alms, was frequent in private Duties;
 " and yet (N.B.) till about six Weeks ago, as destitute of
 " any *SAVING*, *experimental* Knowledge of *Jesus Christ*, as
 " those on whom his Name was never called, and who still
 " *sit in Darkness*, and *the Shadow of Death*." Let any Christian judge whether it does not contradict all that he has ever read or understood of the New Testament, to suppose that a Person *believing* in Christ; *blameless*, and even *exemplary* in his Life and Conversation (for *such* he represents this Mr. Seward to have been) should yet be without any *SAVING* Knowledge of *Jesus Christ*, and as bad as if he was in a State of mere Heathenism. What are we to expect if People's Heads are to be filled with such Notions as these!

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Cases) it cuts up Virtue to the very Root; for he who has no Hope in God *can* have no Heart to serve him.

You see now where this matter ends; and thus much I thought it needful to say at this time to guard the Unwary against some common Delusions. But there is another Caution of more general Concern that should be attended to; which is, that the soundest Faith, and the most excellent Worship, will avail us nothing without a sober and a virtuous Life. *Faith* enters into the Notion of the *new Creature*; but it is not the *whole* of it. To serve God in the use of his Ordinances is his *Commandment* to us; but *so* only as to be subservient to a farther End, the Reformation of our Manners, and the Improvement of our Virtues. Without this *Faith* is *dead*, and *Religion* is *vain*. Those who would do any Credit to the Gospel or Service to themselves, must shew that they are the better for it. Resting in mere Externals is like trusting to the Ceremonies of the Law; for what is there in going to Church, and frequenting the Sacrament, more than in being *circumcised*, the *mere Work* only considered? The Shew and Outside of Religion when there is nothing to answer it in Practice, not only defeats our own Hopes (if we have any Hopes in another World) but gives great Offence to all serious Minds; and it would be well

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worth our considering whether the Unfruitfulness of many under the common means may not have been a Handle to others of a more religious Turn, to strike out into Byways and be the Authors of new Projects, when they have observed that the ordinary Methods would not do. I do not say that this is judging right: For it is not the Method, but Diligence and Industry in the use of that Method, that does the Work. A Man may be as religious as he pleases under any Method that is but right, if he will take the Pains for it. But as some Methods are better calculated to serve the Purposes of Religion than others, and all Men are naturally fond of their own Schemes; the Offences which are given by ill Conduct are easily imputed to some Defect in the Method, which those who see or think they see, will be for mending as well as they are able. As Matters stand with us of the Church of *England*, there are sufficient Means of Christian Improvement without going out of the common Road, if Men are disposed to make the best of them. In this City a Man may go to Church every Day; he may receive the Sacrament (I presume) in his Parish Church once a Month, or, elsewhere, every *Sunday*, if he thinks it convenient. This, one would suppose, is very well. But this will not satisfy many. Religious Societies are set up; which are As-

sociations

sociations (chiefly) of private Men, for praying, reading (if not expounding) the Scriptures, singing Psalms, and so forth. It hath a very good Look, when there are so many Combinations for Vice, that there should be some also for the Encouragement of Virtue; and there may undoubtedly be very good Uses made of such Meetings, *provided* Men keep themselves within proper Bounds. But here lyes the Danger! The being at the Head of a *Society* (as of a *Seet*) gives a Man *Significancy* within that little Sphere, who would not perhaps be taken Notice of in his common Capacity; and when Men once grow opinionated of themselves and fond of their own *Gifts* (which is a wonderful easy Attainment) they will be apt to run into wild Fancies, and the Pale of the Church may grow too narrow for them. There have been Instances of this Sort I am well assured; I hope they are not frequent*.

* The Preacher, and Writer beforementioned who had his Orders among us, and still professes himself a Member of the Church of *England*, tells us of some Conversation he had with *Quakers*, in his Journeyings. It seems they *could not agree* about the *Use of the Sacraments* and the *Payment of Tithes*; but (says he) "I think their Notions about walking and being led by the Spirit are *RIGHT* and *GOOD*." *Journal continued*, p. 59. The young Man, you perceive, is in a very hopeful way! He is a *Quaker* already in the first and leading Principle of that *Seet*. As to his Scruples about *Tithes*, &c. they may *abate* as he grows better acquainted with them, to which he shews a great Disposition by the Complement he pays them. Pray observe this, and mark the End of it.

The thing I would enforce is this: Let every one of us take Care to serve God in the Way he hath appointed, and to *lead a quiet and a peaceable Life in all Godliness and Honesty*. Let us shew by our Proficiency under the Use of the common Means that we have no need of these new Expedients: And what should hinder us? Is not the Church of God, *itself* a Religious Society, in which each Member by the most solemn and sacred Engagements binds himself to the Observance of *Christ's* Laws? What else do we, when we are baptized, when we receive Confirmation, when we offer up to God Prayers and Thanksgivings, and when we partake of the Holy Communion? Can there be any stronger Ties than these? When these things are performed with Seriousness, at proper Times and Seasons, accompanied with Sobriety of Life and Industry in our several Callings; we are carrying on the very Work which God hath appointed for us, and have Reason to look upon ourselves as in the safe and sure Way to eternal Happiness. But to toil and drudge on without ever *lifting up our Hands* to God *from whom our Help cometh*; or to be so much occupied in Spiritual Exercises, as they are called, as to neglect the common Obligations and Duties of Life; these are Extremes alike to be avoided. The one argues a brutish Mind; the other a misguided

ded and overheated Zeal. This last is a Fault that Men do not *often* want to be told of; but *sometimes* they do; and when they do, they should be put in mind of what St. Paul says, 1 COR. vii. 24. *Brethren, let every Man wherein he is called therein abide, with God.* We may be *with God*, you see, and in our Callings too; yea, if we abide not in our Callings we cannot serve God * as we ought to serve him. We may pray, and fast, and do many other such like things; but this will not be *serv- ing God*, if we neglect the Duties of our Callings. The Station in which every Man is placed by the Providence of God, shews him his Duty as plainly as any written Law can do; and when religious Duties fall in with these and help them forward, they are

* “ He only will adorn the Gospel of our Lord *Jesus Christ* in all things who is careful to perform all the Civil “ Offices of Life, whether Servant, Master, or Mistress. — “ This is the Morality which I preach.” *Whitefield’s Journal continued*, p. 91. I hope his Followers will mind this, and that HE will consider how this agrees with his Practice; and with his Treatment of the Minister of St. Michael’s, and the Gentlemen of Gloucester of whom he gives the following Account, p. 74. “ The Minister of St. “ Michael’s was pleased to lend me his Church yesterday “ and to-day; but some wealthy *Demetrius’s* being offend- “ ed at the Greatness of the Congregations, and alledging” (upon EXPERIENCE *no doubt*) “ that it kept People from “ *their Business*, he was influenced by some of them to deny “ the Use of his Pulpit any more on a *Week Day*.” Upon which he remarks — “ Alas! what an Enmity there is “ in the natural Man against the Success of the Gospel! “ How fond are they of *Pharaoh’s* Objection, ye are idle, “ ye are idle, therefore ye say, let us go worship the Lord.” — *Ex ore tuo.*

acceptable to God. But what think you? If a Man should refuse to maintain his aged and indigent Parents; would it be a Justification to say, that he gives away his Money in Charity? Our Saviour hath decided this Point to our Hands, and tells us plainly it is *making the Word of God of none Effect*, MARK vii. 15. It would be the same Case if a Servant should neglect to do his Master's Business, or the Husband or Wife to take Care of their Families upon *whatever* Religious Pretence it is done: For God cannot disannul the eternal Laws of his own Government; and Religion is not Religion, but Folly or something worse, when it is made use of as a Handle to such Practices as these.

May God grant unto us all *the Spirit of a sound Mind*, that having served him *faithfully in this Life*, we may of him be finally rewarded; for the Sake of *Jesus Christ*.

To whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be all Honour and Glory now and for evermore. Amen.

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